

He's 99 and one of our greatest thinkers; James Lovelock was seen as a prophet of doom. Are his theories coming true, asks Tom Whipple

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Body

The problem with naming your theory "Gaia" is that it risks attracting the wrong sort of ally. "It's easy to give a word a kind of false meaning without intending it. It's not a spiritual description or another fancy religion," says James Lovelock, with exasperation. "It's a straightforward engineering attempt to explain the way the world is working."

Yet the venerable scientist, one of the 20th century's most important environmental thinkers, now admits that invoking the ancient Greek earth mother made his life's work too appealing to the kind of green who likes to eat tofu in a yurt and perhaps a little too unappealing to the kind who wants to back Lovelock's solution to climate change - nuclear power.

"If we switch over globally to nuclear, we will have a good few years to make our minds up about other things to do," he says, speaking to me after one of the longest heatwaves in recorded British history. But, he adds, "there have been so many lies told" about nuclear - and it is now so unpopular among the "outrageous hypocrites" of the green movement - that it may not be possible.

Fifty years ago, after working on Nasa's early Mars missions, Lovelock developed the idea that has defined his career and has become more relevant as the effects of climate change are felt across the planet.

Instead of thinking of the Earth as a collection of systems - the atmosphere, the oceans and the animals that occupy them - in the theory of Gaia it is all one, each reinforcing and altering the other.

More than that, this overarching system is, he argues, self-regulating. As in a single organism, there are feedback mechanisms - between plants and animals, animals and the atmosphere - that mean the Earth can be viewed as something that works to maintain conditions necessary for life.

He named the theory Gaia at the behest of his friend the novelist William Golding. "Bill was a really good wordsmith," says Lovelock - a not inaccurate description for a man who won the Nobel prize for literature. Now he admits, speaking from his Dorset house, if he could do one thing differently he would have chosen a more prosaic name - something more off-putting to the crystal-healing and muesli brigade.

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The theory remains controversial and not just because of the name. It has been vehemently opposed by some biologists, including Richard Dawkins, who have argued that, despite Lovelock's protestations, it veers too close to spirituality, to implying the Earth itself has a will.

What is not controversial is that Gaia has been having a hard time of it. Across much of the northern hemisphere, this summer has been one of the hottest in living memory. In Japan it was so bad that the heatwave was declared a natural disaster. In Britain six weeks of 30C temperatures evoked memories of 1976. In California wildfires raged.

Individually, none of this is unprecedented - countries have experienced similar conditions in the past. But not all at the same time.

For the past 30 years Lovelock has been on the prophet-of-doom end of the climate debate. Now, as he approaches 100, it seems that some of those prophecies are coming true.

It is in how we try to avert them that he loses patience with other environmentalists. "There are two things I've got against the greens," he says. "One is that they're the most outrageous hypocrites I've yet come across. The second is the propositions they put across are impractical and damaging."

He says that much of the support for renewable energy comes because "it makes them feel good and look good. They're being 'natural'. But they don't know anything about the Earth. There is no alternative to burning nuclear energy.

"There have been so many lies told about it to make it deliberately expensive, to make it impossible to use. Take Fukushima. Mention the word and everyone immediately thinks of a giant nuclear accident. In practice nobody was killed at Fukushima, but something like 16,000 to 20,000 were killed by the tsunami.

"I think there's a good bit of corruption by the other energy industries who see nuclear's arrival and will swat it by any means and make out it's impossibly expensive. When nuclear first came out, a minister of Attlee's government said it was so cheap we didn't need to meter it. That should have been true."

Lovelock is an independent thinker and has always defied easy classification. The fact that he counts himself better friends with Nigel Lawson, the founder of the climate-sceptic think tank the Global Warming Policy Foundation, than with many of his fellow climate-change believers ("the prominent greens are too religious," he says) in many ways fits the pattern of his life.

In the Second World War he registered as a conscientious objector - a decision as socially difficult as any he has made in his life. But having taken a strong and principled stance, when reports of Nazi atrocities came through he reversed it and tried to enlist. He was refused on the grounds that his research, on burns treatments, was too valuable to the war effort.

In the UK he could have built a successful career in medical science; instead in the early Sixties he moved to the USA to work in Nasa's jet-propulsion laboratory, sharing an office with the astrophysicist and pop-science superstar Carl Sagan.

For this first half of his life he was not a grand sweeping environmental theorist, but a tinkerer and inventor - he created a prototype microwave oven and a device to measure the concentration of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs). He was very good at it, but he decided to shake things up and became an "independent scientist".

In science, "independent" usually means one of two things. The first is that you are a 19th-century aristocrat hobbyist. The second is that you are a crank. But as a fellow of the Royal Society whose mother left school at 13 to work in a pickle factory, Lovelock is neither. He just decided that he would rather work out of his house on the Dorset coast than negotiate the politics of an Oxbridge high table. As such, retirement has never come, but, in a way, neither has proper work.

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"It's a lovely way of life, a very happy one; much more rewarding than a regular job," he says. "The word career is all wrong. It's a vocation and it forces you to be not just a scientist, but an engineer and artist as well."

Here he admits that, with age, he has gained a certain affinity with Gaia, whose health and creaky self-healing properties he sees mirrored in himself. "I'm 99. I think that the Earth is almost at the same kind of age as I am," he says. "We're both somewhat ancient, we may have a few more years to run and the chances are we will make a bit of a mess before we go. It could be quite dire in the next few years."

He says he will not go farther than that. His experience with climate predictions is that certainty is rarely sensible. "Or we could just revert next year to a mild sort of summer."

There have been so many lies told about nuclear power

Graphic

James Lovelock

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